

CHAPTER 21

Solutions: Start Here

Reformers frequently say that poverty is just an excuse, that poverty is not destiny, and that a child's education should not be determined by his or her zip code.

Poverty is not an excuse. It is a harsh reality. No one wants poverty to be any child's destiny. Public schools exist to give all children equal educational opportunity, no matter what their zip code.

Schools fail when they lack the resources to provide equal educational opportunity. And they fail not because of lack of will but because poverty often overwhelms the best of intentions.

Poverty persists not because schools are bad and teachers don't care but because society neglects its root causes. Concentrated poverty and racial segregation are social problems, not school problems. Schools don't cause poverty and racial segregation, nor can schools solve these problems on their own. W. E. B. DuBois said during the depths of the Great Depression that "no school, as such, can organize industry, or settle the matter of wage and income, can found homes or furnish parents, can establish justice or make a civilized world."¹ DuBois was not "making excuses." He was placing the blame for poverty and inequality where it belongs: on the shoulders of those who control industry and government.

DuBois recognized that schools alone cannot create equality or eliminate poverty. They can help highly motivated students escape poverty. Many thousands of personal stories attest to the power of one teacher, one principal, one school, that saved a student from his or her parents' life of hardship. Educators and schools do have remarkable power to save lives.

As important and inspiring as those stories are, they are atypical.

There is no example in which an entire school district eliminated poverty by reforming its schools or by replacing public education with privately managed charters and vouchers. If the root causes of poverty are not addressed, society will remain unchanged. Some poor students will get the chance to go to college, but the vast majority who are impoverished will remain impoverished. The current reform approach is ineffective at eliminating poverty or improving education. It may offer an escape hatch for some poor children, as public schools always have, but it leaves intact the sources of inequality. The current reform approach does not alter the status quo of deep poverty and entrenched inequality. After more than a decade of No Child Left Behind, we now know that a program of testing and accountability leaves millions of children behind and does not eliminate poverty or close achievement gaps. The growing demand for more testing and more accountability in the wake of NCLB is akin to bringing a blowtorch to put out a fire. More of the same is not change. The testing, accountability, and choice strategies offer the illusion of change while changing nothing. They mask the inequity and injustice that are now so apparent in our social order. They do nothing to alter the status quo. They preserve the status quo. They *are* the status quo.

Will it be expensive to address the root causes of poor academic performance? Of course, but probably not as expensive as the cost of doing nothing.

We need broader and deeper thinking. We must decide if we truly want to eliminate poverty and establish equal educational opportunity. We must decide if we truly want to build a society with liberty and justice for all. If that is our true purpose, then we need to move on two fronts, changing society and improving schools at the same time.

Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University reminds us that we know full well how to improve schools:

It's not as though we don't know what works. We could implement the policies that have reduced the achievement gap and transformed learning outcomes for students in high-achieving nations where government policies largely prevent childhood poverty by guaranteeing housing, healthcare and basic income security. These same strategies were substantially successful in our own nation through the programs and policies of the war on poverty and the Great Society, which dra-

matically reduced poverty, increased employment, rebuilt depressed communities, invested in preschool and K-12 education in cities and poor rural areas, desegregated schools, funded financial aid for college and invested in teacher training programs that ended teacher shortages. In the 1970s teaching in urban communities was made desirable by the higher-than-average salaries, large scholarships and forgivable loans that subsidized teacher preparation, and by the exciting curriculum and program innovations that federal funding supported in many city school districts.²

These policies were hugely successful from the 1960s into the 1980s. Darling-Hammond points out that “the black-white reading gap shrank by two-thirds for 17-year-olds, black high school and college graduation rates more than doubled, and, in 1975, rates of college attendance among whites, blacks and Latinos reached parity for the first and only time before or since.”

Thus, those who throw up their hands and say that nothing works are wrong. Those who say that public schools are obsolete and broken are wrong. Those who say that we must abandon public education and replace it with free-market schooling and for-profit vendors are wrong. When the public schools have the appropriate policies, resources, and vision to achieve attainable goals, they respond with positive achievement.

If we know where we want to go, we can begin to discuss the strategies that will move us in the right direction.

We need solutions based on evidence, not assertions or reckless speculation.

CHAPTER 22

Begin at the Beginning

SOLUTION NO. 1 *Provide good prenatal care for every pregnant woman.*

Chapter 10 reviewed research documenting the importance of prenatal care. Babies born to women who did not get prenatal care early in their pregnancies or who got none at all are at risk of being born preterm. Prematurity is the leading cause of death among newborns. Those who survive are at heightened risk of having learning disabilities and other impediments to their full development. Ban Ki-moon, secretary-general of the United Nations, wrote that “newborn deaths—those in the first month of life—account for 40 per cent of all deaths among children under five years of age. Prematurity is the world’s single biggest cause of newborn death, and the second leading cause of all child deaths, after pneumonia. Many of the preterm babies who survive face a lifetime of disability.”¹

A report published by the March of Dimes, the World Health Organization, the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health, and Save the Children gave a low grade to the United States for its failure to prevent premature births. Of 184 countries assessed, the United States ranked 131st. As *Time* magazine put it in describing the study, this is “a worrisome distinction the U.S. shares with Somalia, Turkey and Thailand.” Twelve of every 100 live births in the United States are preterm, about 500,000 each year. Only a handful of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Pakistan, and Southeast Asia rank below us. The best country in the world when measured by the rate of preterm births was Belarus, where fewer than 5 of every 100 children were born

prematurely.²

The March of Dimes global report shows that the average rate for preterm births among developed nations is 8.3 percent. Astonishingly, the U.S. rate of 12 percent was approximately the same as that of nations in sub-Saharan Africa, which lack our vast resources.

Now, here is an interesting question: Why do reformers brandish international test scores, whose validity is uncertain, yet ignore the global report on preterm babies, in which the United States ranks shamefully low in comparison to other developed nations? The human, financial, and academic costs of preterm births are real. Number 131 out of 184 nations in the world: remember that dismal statistic the next time you see or hear a claim by a reformer that we are number 12 or 14 or whatever on international tests of mathematics or science. Why not a sustained national campaign to make the United States first in the world in ensuring that every woman receives the prenatal care she and her baby need?

Reducing preterm births would improve the life chances of half a million children in the United States every year. It would guarantee that more children arrive at school healthy and ready to learn. It would improve academic performance by preventing many cognitive and emotional disabilities. It is far less expensive to prevent learning disabilities at the beginning of pregnancy than to remediate those disabilities for many years into the future.

The March of Dimes report has specific recommendations. They include well-constructed programs to improve nutrition, family planning services, and health education and to reduce substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and exposure to environmental pollution. Women need access to comprehensive prenatal care, as well as quality childbirth services and emergency obstetric care. The global report set a goal of a 50 percent reduction in the preterm birthrate for every country by 2025. In the United States, that means driving the rate down to 6 percent, which would bring us closer to the rate in other developed nations.

Frankly, it is shocking that the world's richest nation has such a high preterm birthrate. It is shocking as a matter of humanity, because so many young lives will be needlessly lost or damaged. It is shocking from a financial standpoint because of the long-term costs of preterm births to society.

This is an excellent place to begin a genuine program of social reform. The research is clear. The need for action is clear. The short-term and long-term benefits are clear. There is a widespread consensus on how to address and remedy the problem.

Children will be healthier. They will have fewer disabilities. There will be fewer referrals to special education in the future. The costs to society will be reduced, far more than the cost of the medical care provided at the right time.

Our society, our children, our families, our communities, and our schools will reap the rewards.

CHAPTER 23

The Early Years Count

SOLUTION NO. 2 *Make high-quality early childhood education available to all children.*

The achievement gaps among different groups of students begin before the first day of school. Gaps exist between African American and white students; between Hispanic and white students; and between advantaged and disadvantaged students, because they have been exposed to very different environments. Some children hear many words and have a large vocabulary; others do not. Some children have parents who are college educated; others do not. Some get regular visits to the doctor and the dentist; others do not. Some live in comfortable homes in safe neighborhoods; others do not.

These differences affect children's readiness to learn. They influence their vocabulary and background knowledge. Access to health care and nutrition affect their physical and mental development. Of course, all children can learn, but some have a head start because of their socioeconomic circumstances, while others start far behind.

By itself, early childhood education cannot completely close the gaps caused by inequality of wealth and inequality of opportunity, but researchers have concluded that it is more successful in narrowing the gap than most other interventions. Early childhood education programs have abundant research to support them, unlike the currently fashionable "reforms," which have very little or no research or experience to back them up.

One of the most prominent advocates of early childhood education is James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist at the Univer-

sity of Chicago. Heckman approaches the subject as an economist, in search of the most cost-effective way to heal economic and social dysfunction. In the past few decades, he says, the proportion of children born into disadvantaged environments has been increasing, putting them at risk of teen pregnancy, crime, poor health, and a lifetime of low earnings. He observed that the accident of birth powerfully affects one's life chances; this is bad not only for the individuals but for society, which loses their potential contributions. He assembled evidence to demonstrate that "the absence of supportive family environments harms child outcomes." The good news, however, is that "if society intervenes early enough, it can improve cognitive and socio-emotional abilities and the health of disadvantaged children." Early intervention not only enhances the life prospects of children but also has a high benefit-cost ratio and rate of return for society's investment. Heckman argues that early intervention is more cost-effective than later interventions that target older students and adults. Building a strong foundation for learning in the early years is crucial: "Skill begets skill; motivation begets motivation." He writes that "if a child is not motivated to learn and engage early on in life, the more likely it is that when the child becomes an adult, it will fail in social and economic life. The longer society waits to intervene in the life cycle of a disadvantaged child, the more costly it is to remediate disadvantage."¹

Heckman believes that noncognitive skills are as important for success in life as cognitive skills. But federal education policy, represented by No Child Left Behind, prioritizes cognitive skills and ignores noncognitive skills like motivation, self-discipline, and the ability to work with others, even though these skills are highly valued in the workplace. The growing divide in American society, Heckman writes, is attributable in large part to the decline of the American family, the growing proportion of children raised in disadvantaged families, the dramatic rise in the proportion of single-parent families and never-married mothers, who are less likely to invest in their children as they are growing up. This phenomenon, he says, is "especially pronounced for African American families." Compared with poorly educated women, more educated women are less likely to have children out of wedlock and more likely to be married, have fewer children, and invest more time and resources in the upbringing of their children. The children who lack these circumstances start far behind. Heckman insists that poverty

is not destiny and that society can effectively intervene to change the early environment in which children are raised. Heckman cites longitudinal studies like the Nurse-Family Partnership program, the Perry Preschool Project, and the Abecedarian Project to demonstrate that investment in early childhood education improves noncognitive skills, has significant, lasting effects, and thus represents the best return on society's investment. Heckman recommends that when center-based programs end, they should be followed up by home-visiting programs that encourage a permanent change in the child's home environment and improved parenting. Such interventions, he recognizes, must be sensitive to cultural differences.²

Heckman's work was influenced by major longitudinal studies of preschool education. The most important of these studies was the Perry Preschool Project. David Weikart, who had just earned a PhD at the University of Michigan, started the project in 1961 at Perry Elementary School in Ypsilanti, Michigan. At the time, many people assumed that IQ was fixed and that interventions made no difference. Weikart set out to prove they were wrong.³

The project enrolled fifty-eight poor African American children, beginning at age three. Most of the children attended for three hours a day for two years. The school developed its own active-learning curriculum that encouraged children to plan their own daily activities. Most of the Perry teachers had master's degrees in child development. There was one teacher for every six children. They received salaries similar to public school teachers. Teachers made weekly home visits, teaching parents how to turn everyday activities into learning experiences for their children.

The project tracked the progress of these fifty-eight students until they were adults, well into their forties. They were "less likely than students in the control group to skip school, be assigned to a special education class, or have to repeat a grade. By age nineteen, 66 percent of them had graduated from high school, as compared to 45 percent of those who hadn't gone to Perry." As adults, they earned more, paid more taxes, were less likely to be on welfare, and were less likely to have been incarcerated. They were more likely to own a home and a car. On average, those who had the benefit of the Perry Preschool Project were contributors to society. Of the control group, 52 percent spent some time in jail for various offenses, as compared with 28 percent of those who had

been in the preschool program. From the perspective of economists, an investment in high-quality preschool education improved the lives of those who were in the program and paid handsome returns to society.⁴

It is important to note important aspects of the Perry Preschool Project that contributed to its stellar record:

One, the teachers were very well trained for their work.

Two, class sizes were small so that each child received the time and attention needed from the teacher.

Three, parent education was integral to the work of the project.

Teachers paid weekly home visits to teach the parents to engage their children and support what they were learning each day.

Knowing what we know from research about the value of early childhood education, how do we compare to other nations in providing it to our population? *The Economist* magazine surveyed the condition of early childhood education in forty-five nations in terms of availability and quality. The Nordic countries led the pack: Finland, Sweden, and Norway were at the top, "thanks to sustained, long-term investments and prioritization of early childhood development, which is now deeply embedded in society. In general, Europe's state-led systems perform well, as the provision of universal preschool has steadily become a societal norm." The United States, the wealthiest nation in the world, ranked twenty-fourth, in a tie with the United Arab Emirates. Compared with the top European nations, where preschool was near universal, only 54 percent of U.S. children in the relevant age group attended preschool.⁵

Since we know as a matter of fact that the achievement gap begins in the earliest years, reformers should be demanding an expansion of early childhood education of high quality with well-prepared teachers. I want to stress the second part of the last sentence: *high quality with well-prepared teachers*. Few Head Start centers met those requirements. Is it not a scandal that we rank twenty-fourth among the world's most advanced nations? Reform could make a difference here if we mean to reduce the achievement gaps and improve the lives of children.

The case for early childhood education is based on sound research, conducted over many years. The evidence is overwhelming. Early childhood education works. Early intervention can make a lasting difference

children's lives. It's expensive to do it right. It's even more expensive to do half measures or not to do it at all.

CHAPTER 24

The Essentials of a Good Education

SOLUTION NO. 3 *Every school should have a full, balanced, and rich curriculum, including the arts, science, history, literature, civics, geography, foreign languages, mathematics, and physical education.*

Since the advent of No Child Left Behind, many schools have cut back on every subject that was not tested. The federal law demanded that all students be proficient in mathematics and reading by 2014, and every state was required to test those subjects. Nothing counted other than mathematics and reading. Schools expanded the time available to teach these subjects, which determined whether they would be honored or humiliated, whether they would live or die. More time was allotted to take practice tests in mathematics and reading. Because there are only so many hours in a day, there was less time for subjects that were not tested. When the economic recession of 2008 began, many schools experienced budget cuts. The combination of budget cuts and high-stakes testing meant that something had to go. When cutbacks were necessary, it was in the nontested subjects. When teachers were laid off, they were usually those who do not teach the tested subjects.

Our policy makers today think that what matters most is getting high test scores in reading and mathematics. They don't show any regrets if a school spends inordinate amounts of time and money on test preparation materials. They will pin an A label on a school that gets high scores, even if its students spend all day every day practicing to take tests in mathematics and reading. But such a school is really not a good school, even if it gets high scores and the state awards it an A.

So we must look for other indicators, not just test scores, and not the official grade offered by the state or the district, which is unduly tied to test scores.

Let us consider two other ways of evaluating schools.

One is to ask what the most demanding families seek in a school.

The other is to consider the school in relation to the purposes of public education.

What do the most demanding families seek in a school? Whether they are parents in an affluent suburb or parents whose children attend an expensive private school, they expect their children to have much, much more than training in basic skills. They expect their children to study history and literature, science and mathematics, the arts and foreign languages. They would never tolerate a school that did not have dramatics, art, music, and science laboratories. They would insist that the school have up-to-date technology that their children could use every day. They would expect excellent athletic facilities and daily physical education. If their child is unusually bright, they would expect advanced courses to keep her curiosity and zest for learning alive. If their child has disabilities of any kind, they would expect the school to have appropriately trained personnel to offer the help and support the child needs. They would correctly anticipate small classes, projects, and frequent writing assignments. They would want a full range of student activities, including student government, a newspaper, clubs, after-school activities, and plays.

In affluent communities today, such schools are the norm in the public sector; not just the private sector. They were once the norm in ordinary American public schools. Today, however, the No Child Left Behind law and the Race to the Top program have undermined this ideal curriculum and restricted it to only the most affluent communities. Because federal policies value only test scores, they have unleashed an almost fanatical obsession with data based on test scores. Today, almost every state has received federal funding to create a data "warehouse," where information about all students and teachers will be stored for future retrieval. What is the purpose of the data warehouse? No one knows for sure, but it will enable all students to be tracked throughout their lifetimes in relation to their test scores, graduation dates, future earnings, and who knows what else. Even now, the Gates Foundation and Rupert Murdoch's Amplify division have joined to

create a \$100 million database called inBloom to collect confidential student information from several states and districts and put it on an electronic "cloud" managed by Amazon.com. This data will include students' names, birthdates, addresses, social security numbers, grades, test scores, disability status, attendance, and other confidential information. The database may be made available to vendors for marketing purposes. Why the modern state should collect and share so much confidential information about its citizens is baffling.¹

In contrast to federal policy, which is obsessed with test-based data, educated consumers of schooling want their children to have a full, balanced, and rich curriculum. They may look into outcome data about a school (for example, how many of its students graduate, how many go to college, which colleges admit its graduates), but their first concern is "inputs": What educational experiences will my child have? How experienced are the teachers? How small are classes? Are there a variety of athletic programs that are right for my child? Will my child have a broad curriculum? If she needs extra help, will she get it? Does the school have a warm and welcoming climate? Will this school take good care of my child?

An educated parent would not accept a school where many weeks of every school year were spent preparing for state tests. An educated parent would not tolerate a school that cut back or eliminated the arts to spend more time preparing for state tests. If you want to know what an educated parent-consumer would insist upon, go online and look at the curricula in schools such as Sidwell Friends in the District of Columbia; Lakeside School in Seattle; Deerfield Academy in Deerfield, Massachusetts; Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts; and Maumee Valley Country Day School in Toledo, Ohio. Every one of these schools has a curriculum with extensive offerings in the arts, languages, world cultures, history, sciences, mathematics, and athletics.

A similar curriculum may be found in affluent suburban communities, richly endowed by their strong tax bases and committed parents. Families in communities like Plano, Texas, Deerfield, Illinois, and Scarsdale, New York, would accept nothing less for their children.

The typical public school today cannot afford the same offerings. It cannot afford the small classes and rich curriculum available only to the richest citizens. And yet I can personally attest that in the past American public schools routinely offered a varied curriculum, even

if the class sizes were not 1:15 as they are in many elite private schools. Why today are public schools unable to afford the curriculum they once offered? Why is the richest nation in the world unable to provide a full curriculum for all students in public schools? Why are budget cuts in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008 falling so heavily on the public schools? Why are states willing to spend hundreds of millions on testing and test preparation materials even as they cut back on teachers of the arts and foreign languages and on librarians and counselors?

We cannot provide equal educational opportunity if some children get access to a full and balanced curriculum while others get a heavy dose of basic skills. This is one instance where no research is needed. The fact of inequality is undeniable, self-evident, and unjustifiable. This inequality of opportunity may damage the hearts and minds of the children who are shortchanged in ways that may never be undone.

We know that those who can afford the best for their children demand a full curriculum. Another way to judge the importance of a high-value curriculum is to consider what it should be in light of the purposes of public education. The nation established public education as a public responsibility in the nineteenth century to educate future citizens and to sustain our democracy. The essential purpose of the public schools, the reason they receive public funding, is to teach young people the rights and responsibilities of citizens. As citizens, they will be expected to discuss and deliberate issues, to choose our leaders, to take an active role in their communities, and to participate in civic affairs. A secondary purpose was to strengthen our economy and our culture by raising the intelligence of our people and preparing them to lead independent lives as managers, workers, producers, and creators of ideas, products, and services. A third purpose is to endow every individual with the intellectual and ethical power to pursue his or her own interests and to develop the judgment and character to survive life's vicissitudes.

Today, policy makers think of education solely in terms of its secondary purposes. They speak of children as future global competitors. They sometimes refer to children in rather ugly terms as "human assets," forgetting that they are unique people and they are not fungible. They want all students to be "college and career ready." They tend to speak only of preparation for the workforce, not education for citizenship. But this is misguided. Workforce training may take place

in schools; it may take place in the workplace. It is not unimportant. Nor is college preparation unimportant. But getting ready for college is not the central purpose of education. Nor is workforce training. The central purpose of education is to prepare everyone to assume the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy.

What does this mean for schooling?

It means first of all that all citizens need the essential tools of learning, which are reading and mathematics. Knowing how to read and knowing how numbers are used (and misused) to characterize almost everything are basic necessities for citizens.

Basic skills are necessary, but they are not enough to prepare the citizen.

A citizen of a democratic society must be able to read critically, listen carefully, evaluate competing claims, weigh evidence, and come to a thoughtful judgment. In their hands will be the most important responsibilities of citizenship: choosing our leaders and serving on juries. One determines the fate of our nation and the other determines the fate of other humans.

To come to a thoughtful judgment about political affairs, citizens need a solid grounding in history, economics, and statistics. They will hear candidates make conflicting claims about what history proves and what the economy needs. Citizens need to understand the great issues in American and world history. They should know about Jim Crow, the Progressive movement, Prohibition, the Great Depression, the McCarthy era, the *Brown* decision, the Cold War, and the other events and issues that shaped our world today. They need to understand the measures that have helped or harmed the economy. They need to recognize how conflicts have started and ended. They need to know and understand enough to reach their own judgments about candidates and issues and proposed legislation.

To know the evil and the goodness of which men are capable, they must study history. To know the mechanisms that have been created to protect our rights and freedoms, they must study the Constitution and other founding documents. To learn about the many struggles that others have waged to improve our imperfect democracy, they must study history.

To be prepared for their weighty responsibilities, they need to study government, economics, and civics. These studies teach them how their

society functions and how it may be changed. To be prepared to judge issues on the world scene, they need to study world history and world geography to learn about other forms of government and other ways of organizing society than the one that is most familiar to us.

As citizens, our students will be expected to come to judgments about complex scientific issues. They need to understand science and to bring their critical judgment to bear on questions such as global warming, cloning, evolution, the effects of smoking or sugar, regulation of drilling for natural gas and oil, and debates about maintaining clean air and clean water. As candidates debate these issues, voters must be informed and ready to make their own judgments. They must know how to research the issues and contesting claims. As advocates for industry advance their interests, citizens must be able to weigh their claims. Their knowledge of science and their understanding of scientific method will prepare them to reach their own judgments in matters of public dispute.

As citizens, our students will be called upon to judge the character of those who seek to persuade them. They will need that judgment when casting a vote, when serving on a jury, when deciding whom to trust. They will gain insight into character through the study of literature. By reading good and great works of fiction, students learn about character, motivation, kindness, greatness of spirit, imagination, the depths of evil, chicanery, and other aspects of human nature. Literature provides students with the opportunity to experience life through the eyes of other people in other times and other places. Literature, like history, is a superb way to travel through time, to be transported into another world. A good education steps outside the world of textbooks and work sheets and introduces students to worlds that they never dreamed of and to ideas that change their way of thinking. It introduces them to authors who use language imaginatively and beautifully and to cultural experiences that they can enjoy and share.

To function effectively in the world of the twenty-first century, students should learn a foreign language. They should use their language skills to learn about the culture, literature, history, and arts of other societies. They should broaden their knowledge of the world so that they recognize that other people think differently; by doing so, they should abandon any narrow provincialism and get a clearer understanding of other cultures.

All of these studies are important parts of a rich and balanced curriculum. They may be taught separately, or they may be taught as integrated studies of society. There is no single right way. Teachers are best equipped to judge how to teach, how to inspire young minds with a thirst to learn more.

None of these studies should be subject to budget cuts. They are essential ingredients of a liberal education.

All are enriched and enhanced by the arts. The arts are essential for everyone. Life is enhanced by the arts. No student should be denied the opportunity to participate in the arts or to learn about the arts as practiced here and in other cultures. All students should have the chance to sing, dance, draw, and paint in school. They should have the resources for video production and for chorus, for band and for orchestra. The arts are a source of joy, a means of self-expression and group expression. To master a musical instrument or to participate in choral music requires self-discipline and practice; no one can do it for you. Every school should have the resources to enable students to express their individuality or to take pleasure in joyful communal activity.

The ancients spoke of a healthy mind in a healthy body, and in our time we have forgotten the wisdom of that maxim. Children and adolescents need physical activity. They need recess during the day, to relax and run and shout and play. They need structured play and games where they can learn physical discipline, whether in gymnastics or sports. Their youthful energy should be channeled into track and field, basketball, cycling, swimming, volleyball, and other activities.

School provides a place for mental, physical, and ethical development. Character is taught and learned in many settings: in the classroom, in the hallways, in the lunchroom, and on the sports field. One of the reasons that online schools do not succeed is that children and youths need social interaction to develop the soft skills that are needed in life and work. They must learn the skills of democratic society, the give-and-take of participation in shared activities. They learn together to put on a play, to organize a game, to collaborate on a science project or a mock trial. All of these activities prepare them for life in ways unmeasured by standardized tests. These skills of interaction cannot be learned on a computer. They are learned together with others in shared tasks.

For the past two decades, even before No Child Left Behind, the

U.S. educational system has had an unhealthy focus on testing and accountability—unhealthy because it has driven public policy to concentrate on standardized tests of uneven quality at the expense of the more important goals of education, like character and love of learning. Sadly, the growing obsession with data has shoved aside these important goals. Consequently, children are tested again and again, compelled to select a box on a multiple-choice test, which is then turned into a definitive judgment about their value and their intelligence. Today, we accord to standardized test scores the same power that was once granted to intelligence tests. They are taken to be a measure of the worth of boys and girls and ultimately a measure of their teachers as well.

Anyone who truly cares about children must be repelled by the insistence on ranking them, rating them, and labeling them. Whatever the tests measure is not the sum and substance of any child. The tests do not measure character, spirit, heart, soul, potential. When overused and misused, when attached to high stakes, the tests stifle the very creativity and ingenuity that our society needs most. Creativity and ingenuity stubbornly resist standardization. Tests should be used sparingly to help students and teachers, not to allocate rewards and punishments and not to label children and adults by their scores.

We cheat children when we do not give them the chance to learn more than basic skills. We cheat them when we evaluate them by standardized tests. We undervalue them when we turn them into data points.

If we mean to educate them, we must recognize that all children deserve a full liberal arts curriculum. All children need the chance to develop their individual talents. And all need the opportunity to learn the skills of working and playing and singing with others. Whatever the careers of the twenty-first century may be, they are likely to require creativity, thoughtfulness, and the capacity for social interaction and personal initiative, not simply routine skills. All children need to be prepared as citizens to participate in a democratic society. A democratic society cannot afford to limit the skills and knowledge of a liberal education only to children of privilege and good fortune.

CHAPTER 25

Class Size Matters for Teaching and Learning

SOLUTION NO. 4 *Reduce class sizes to improve student achievement and behavior.*

Most teachers and parents agree about the importance of small classes. Parents care about class size because they know that the amount of individual attention their child will receive depends on the size of the class. When Scholastic and the Gates Foundation surveyed teachers in 2012, 90 percent said that having fewer students in their classes would have a strong or very strong impact on academic achievement. The demand for smaller classes was greatest among teachers in the elementary grades. Nearly all teachers—ranging from 83 percent in high school to 94 percent in the elementary grades—agreed that reducing class size would have a strong or very strong impact on student achievement. In contrast, only 26 percent of teachers responded that performance pay would make a strong or very strong impact on student achievement. Teachers said that having a smaller class meant more to them than the chance to earn extra money.¹

In another Gates-funded survey, only 4 percent of veteran teachers and 6 percent of newer teachers (less than ten years' experience) said they would be willing to accept larger classes in exchange for a higher salary.²

Although most parents and teachers are enthusiastic about class size reduction, policy makers and elected officials sometimes argue against it because it is seen as too costly. Some make the case that when they attended school, classes were larger, and yet they succeeded. Mayor

Michael Bloomberg of New York City has said that when he went to school, there were forty students in each class, and if it was in his power to redesign the school system, he would cut the number of teachers in half, "weed out all the bad ones," double class size, and double the pay of the remaining teachers. He maintained that to "double the class size with a better teacher is a good deal for the students."³

However, when older people remember the supposedly "good old days" of forty or more students in a class, they are evoking a different time in American history. They are recalling a time when most schools had classes of homogeneous students. They are remembering a time before court decisions and federal legislation ended legal segregation. They are remembering a time before students with disabilities were included in public schools and before all but the most severely disabled were mainstreamed into regular classes. They are remembering a time before massive immigration from non-English-speaking nations in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere. Many of those who fondly remember the "good old days" were in classrooms that included few, if any, students who did not speak English, had disabilities, or were of a race different from their own. Moreover, even in those supposedly good old days, the schools with many poor or immigrant children had low achievement (far lower than now) and high dropout rates (far higher than now), but this wasn't seen as consequential, because there were jobs available for those who did not graduate.

It is a different world now. Teachers may have students in their classes who have mental or emotional disabilities or behavioral problems, who speak little or no English, or who live in extreme poverty and may be homeless. Classes are seldom homogeneous and are more likely to have children with a range of backgrounds and achievement levels. Students in need of substantial individual attention are unlikely to get it when they are in large classes. Because of budget cuts, class sizes have increased in many districts, with teachers reporting classes as large as forty or more, especially in the large urban districts with the highest-need students.

The Scholastic-Gates survey asked teachers who had been teaching in the same school for at least five years about the changes they observed in their classes. Nearly two-thirds said they now had more students with behavioral problems; about half said they have more students living in poverty, more who were English-language learners, and more

who arrived at school hungry. Thirty-six percent reported an increase in homeless students. These are not the sorts of students that many of the old-timers recall from their childhoods. The increased numbers of at-risk students make it especially difficult to teach large classes.⁴

When the Scholastic-Gates survey asked teachers what they considered the ideal class size, elementary teachers estimated eighteen to nineteen students; middle school teachers of grades 6–8 estimated twenty to twenty-one students; and high school teachers estimated twenty to twenty-one students. Teachers who were working in urban districts had significantly larger classes on average. Because of sharp state and local budget cuts, most teachers today have larger classes than before the economic recession. In New York City, for example, class sizes in grades K–3 are now the largest in fourteen years. Class sizes have risen sharply in all grades, and nearly half of middle school students and more than half of high school students are in classes that average thirty or more. In some urban districts, classes are closer to forty. In California, Michigan, and Oregon, some classes hold close to fifty students.⁵

One of the high school teachers surveyed for the Scholastic-Gates report unknowingly answered Mayor Bloomberg's comment about doubling class size: "I could teach larger numbers of students. But which class would you prefer to have your kid in?" No parent would prefer to have her child in a class of forty-eight if she could choose a class of twenty-four. And the teacher who is rated "highly effective" with twenty-four children would likely have a far lower value-added rating if the class size doubled. Yet the growth score models used to evaluate teachers rarely if ever take the critical factor of class size into account.

In response to the Scholastic-Gates survey, an elementary school teacher said, "I am a general education teacher but at least 50 percent of my class each year has special needs. At least 25 percent of these students have extreme behavior problems which interfere with teaching the other students to learn."

A middle school teacher pointed out, "We have larger classes, more behavioral problems, increased numbers of special education students, limited technology, and no teacher aides. It's not easy, but I do it. I'm not sure how much longer I can do it, though."⁶

As classes become more diverse, students require more time. Teachers can't give them the time they need if the classes are unmanageable.

A salient finding of the class size research is that children tend to be more engaged and less disruptive when they are enrolled in a smaller class.

If a teacher has a large class, his or her job becomes an exercise in management and control rather than in instruction. If the same teacher has twenty students in a class, he or she has more time to know each of them and give them the help they need, and they are less likely to act out and become problems for the teacher and the rest of the class.

Reducing class size is costly. It is an expensive intervention because it means hiring more teachers for the same number of students. But the benefits of class size reduction are so large that the cost is well worth it, in terms of higher achievement levels, raising graduation rates, and lowering special education referrals, especially if the reductions are targeted to the students who need it most. Schools and districts have a choice: they can reduce class sizes now and reap the benefits for years; or they can increase class sizes and pay the cost of remediation, disruptive behavior, and failure for many years. Both routes are costly, but one involves spending to produce early and lasting success, and the other involves spending to compensate for failure.

The research on class size is extensive. Some researchers argue against it, but they are in a minority. The Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education has identified class size reduction as one of the few evidence-based reforms that has been proven effective.⁷

Class size reduction has many beneficial effects. Large-scale experiments have demonstrated that it has a significant positive effect on minority children in the early grades. Children who are in smaller classes in the early grades get higher test scores and better grades, behave better in school, are more likely to graduate from high school, and are more likely to go to college. Longitudinal research shows that the benefits of having smaller classes in elementary school last into adulthood.⁸

Not surprisingly, attending smaller classes helps to develop the non-cognitive skills that the economist James Heckman says are so important to success in work, in college, and later in life, like persistence, motivation, and self-esteem. Smaller classes offer more opportunities for social cooperation, participating in discussion and debate, and developing the sort of critical thinking that is increasingly recognized to be essential in college and most careers. The smaller group promotes positive behaviors and interactions, as compared with the larger classes,

where the emphasis is likely to be on order and compliance.⁹

Experiments in class size reduction have been conducted in the early grades, but not in middle school or high school. However, controlled studies in middle school and high school have reported that reduced class sizes there make a positive difference and that students in smaller classes had higher test scores and were less likely to drop out of school than their peers in larger classes. A study of 2,561 schools released by the U.S. Department of Education found that student achievement was closely linked to class size, even in the upper grades.¹⁰

Class size reduction has been shown to have a significant impact on the black-white achievement gap. Low-income students who spend four years in a smaller class in the early grades are far more likely to graduate from high school on time. In addition, black students who were in small classes eventually get higher scores on their college-entrance tests than those who were not. Paul Barton of the Educational Testing Service has speculated that national decreases in class size during the 1970s and 1980s may have been a major factor in the significant narrowing of the achievement gap that occurred at that time.¹¹

Students are not the only ones to benefit by having smaller classes. Teachers also benefit. They are less likely to leave teaching or to change schools if they have small, manageable classes.¹² With smaller classes, they are able to devote more time to reading and commenting on essays and other student work. Reducing teacher turnover—or churn—is important, because experienced teachers are more effective and because students and schools function best when there is a strong collaborative culture and a stable staff.

It is odd that so many prominent business, political, and foundation leaders think that class size is not an important element in school reform. When they select a public or private school for their own children, they invariably demand schools with small class sizes. The catalogs of the best private schools seldom fail to mention their 12:1 ratio of students to teachers, or even 8:1. The best suburban public schools seldom have classes larger than eighteen. And yet those who would accept nothing less for their own children find it hard to imagine the same conditions for poor and minority children.

Critics complain about the cost of reducing class size. But it is even more expensive to continue to have large classes, especially for disadvantaged and at-risk students who benefit the most from class size

reduction. Whatever may be saved today by laying off teachers and increasing class sizes will be offset many times by the costs of remediation and special services for children who fall behind and suffer the consequences of high dropout rates and unemployment that result. If as a society we really want our schools to improve and all children to succeed, we will guarantee that they are provided with the benefits of small classes that are now reserved primarily for the children of the wealthy.

CHAPTER 26

Make Charters Work for All

SOLUTION NO. 5 *Ban for-profit charters and charter chains and ensure that charter schools collaborate with public schools to support better education for all children.*

In the world of contemporary school reform, charters are considered the silver-bullet solution for children who live in poverty, but the results have been mixed and disappointing. Numerous studies by independent researchers have found that the achievement levels of charters vary widely, when judged by test scores, from highly successful at one extreme to highly unsuccessful at the other.¹

Typically, in most states and districts, charters on average do not get different test scores from public schools if they enroll the same kinds of students. Many studies show that charters enroll a disproportionately small share of students who are English-language learners or who have disabilities, as compared with their home district. A survey of expulsion rates in the District of Columbia found that the charters—which enroll nearly half the student population of the district—expel large numbers of children; the charters' expulsion rate is seventy-two times the expulsion rate in the public schools. The students who are kicked out of the charters return to the public schools. As the charters shun these students, the local district gets a disproportionately large number of the students who are most expensive and most challenging to educate; when public students leave for charters, the budget of the public schools shrinks, leaving them less able to provide a quality education to the vast majority of students. In effect, a cycle of decline is set in motion: the charter school enrolls the most motivated students, avoids the students

with high needs, and boasts of its higher scores; the test scores in the public school decline as some of its best students leave for the charter, and the proportion of needy students increases.²

Meanwhile, there is a growing for-profit charter sector and a proliferation of charter chains, which are akin to chain stores that open in malls and either thrive or close. For-profit online charter schools are booming, even though they get poor results, whether judged by test scores, graduation rates, or attrition. And yet they are very profitable for investors because of their low costs. The for-profit charter chains are doing what businesses do in a competitive environment: they are practicing risk management, keeping the winners and discarding the losers. That may work in business, where the goal is profitability. But it is wrong in education, where public schools are expected to educate all children, not just the easiest to teach.

Charters have become very controversial as they expand because the few that have high test scores tend to be boastful of their superiority, which does not create goodwill among educators. Further, in districts that place charters into existing public schools, there is usually hostility and jostling for space between an underfunded public school and a richly endowed charter school, which enjoys abundant financial support from its private board of trustees and exhibits an air of condescension toward its host school. Co-locations, as they are called in New York City, have been especially contentious because of the predatory practices of some of the aggressive charter chains that enter as tenants but do not hesitate to monopolize facilities and eventually try to push out the host school. Many of these charters are staffed by young college graduates who work unusually long hours, burn out, and leave for other careers, which creates constant teacher turnover.

With two million students now attending charter schools, charters are here to stay. Is it possible to make them a productive part of American public education, rather than a disruptive force? The problem with charters as currently configured is that they have strayed so far from the original intention of their founding fathers, Ray Budde and Albert Shanker. These men, who did not know each other, both envisioned the charter idea in 1988. They saw charters as a way to empower public school teachers to devise their own innovative curricula and methods and to free them from excessive regulation and bureaucracy. Neither man thought of charters as a way to transfer control of public schools

to private hands or to create profit-making enterprises for stockholders or to destroy teachers' rights and their unions. Their good ideas were distorted by quirks of fate and the entrepreneurial drive to expand and make money.

If charters continue to expand aggressively in districts across the nation, there is a risk of reverting to a publicly funded dual school system, especially in our nation's cities. Instead of being based solely on racial lines, this dual school system would be based on both racial and class lines. Charter schools would recruit and enroll students who are motivated and willing, while public schools would serve the rejects, the students who didn't make it into a charter school, those who were unwanted by charters because they didn't speak English, had disabilities, or threatened in some other way to lower the charter's test scores. A dual school system is inherently discriminatory, especially when one sector is privately run, deregulated, unsupervised, and free to write its own rules and avoid or eject students it does not want, and the other must take all students and abide by all state laws and regulations, no matter how burdensome and costly. At present, the most successful of the charters spend substantially more than the public schools, while the public schools enroll the students that are most costly to educate.³ When fully evolved, such a system would turn the public schools into schools of last resort rather than institutions that reflect and serve their communities.

Charters could become a positive force in American education if the conditions under which they are authorized are changed. Given the money and political power of the charter movement, it will be difficult politically to alter the authorizing laws. But as charters move into affluent districts, putting admired public schools in jeopardy, there is a chance that public resistance will increase and make political changes possible. To make such changes will require leadership and legislative majorities that recognize the importance of public education as a basic democratic institution. Charters should become collaborators with public schools in a shared mission to serve the needs of all children. But to understand where they should go, we need to understand their original purpose, which is now long forgotten.

Ray Budde, a University of Massachusetts professor, envisioned charters as a way to reorganize district management and free teachers from unnecessary bureaucracy. He thought of them as self-governing

schools, liberated to find new solutions to pedagogical problems. He did not imagine them as for-profit enterprises operating chains across the nation, nor as organizations aggressively entering districts to build market share. He did not see them as a way to extinguish teachers' unions or to regiment children with rigid discipline codes.

Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, wanted to find alternative ways to educate disengaged students. In his vision of charters, teachers would bring their plan to their colleagues and their district for approval. The new charter school, as he saw it, would seek out and enroll the most difficult-to-educate students, the dropouts, and those at risk of dropping out. The teachers in the charter would be free to make up their own curriculum and try whatever they thought might work. They would share whatever they learned with their colleagues in the regular public school.

As I described in chapter 16, Shanker turned against the charter concept in 1993, when he realized that it was embraced by conservative governors and would advance privatization.

How can charters now work for the common good instead of competing with public schools for students, for facilities, and for resources? How can they collaborate instead of driving into bankruptcy the public schools that educate the great majority of students?

The answer lies in the charter schools' origins.

Imagine the following changes in state laws.

First, no public school should be operated for profit. At present, for-profit corporations compete to lower costs, and they do this by replacing experienced teachers with inexperienced teachers and by replacing teachers with computer instruction. The primary goal of a for-profit organization is to maximize profit, not to produce great education. Tax dollars for education should be spent entirely on the operation of schools and the provision of instruction and school activities. Not a penny should go to pay investors or stockholders. Certainly, some tax revenues will necessarily go to profit-making corporations that sell supplies and services to schools, but the schools themselves should always be operated as nonprofits.

Second, charter schools should be managed by local educators and nonprofit organizations, not by charter chains. They should be standalone, community-based schools designed and managed by parents, teachers, and members of the local community for the children of that

district. They should not be run like Walmart or Target. By allowing schools to operate like chain stores, states have encouraged a chain-store mentality, with standardized management and standardized practices, run from another city or state. Schooling is not a commodity that can be packaged and distributed across the nation, a standard product that is not responsive to individual children and local needs. The ideal charter school would be created by the community, to serve the community, reflecting the goals and needs of the community.

Third, charter schools would still be privately managed with a private board of directors, as at present, but the salaries of charter school principals and executives should be aligned with those of local district principals and superintendents. This would eliminate the practice of paying exorbitant executive salaries and would eliminate charter leaders who have a pecuniary interest. It would keep the focus where it should be, on creating a superior and innovative educational program that serves a public purpose, not on cashing in with public funding.

Fourth, state law should closely regulate online virtual charter schools to provide oversight for recruitment practices, attrition rates, misrepresentation, and quality. The reimbursement of virtual charter schools should be reduced to reflect their actual costs of instruction; when students leave the online school in midyear, their funding should follow them to their next school. For-profit schools would be banned, and salaries would be regulated to prevent fraud and abuse. Students who wish to enroll in an online school should be interviewed by guidance counselors and have legitimate reasons for home instruction.

Fifth, a significant proportion of charter schools should enroll and educate the children who are not succeeding in public school, for whatever reason. They should seek out and recruit dropouts or children with behavioral problems or students with special needs whose parents do not want them to be mainstreamed, such as those with profound autism or profound deafness. Charter schools would explore new ways to educate these students. They should develop strategies and curricula to benefit all schools and regularly share what they have learned. If charter schools sought to enroll the neediest students, they would become an integral part of public education and a valued partner of public schools. Instead of fighting with each other over space and resources, the two sectors would have a common goal of educating all children well and a genuine basis for shared responsibility.

These changes are far removed from where we are now. But as the facts on the ground change, our laws can change to adapt to what we have learned and what we hope to accomplish. Charter schools and public schools should not compete; they should work together. Charters can be redesigned to serve the common good. Together, public schools and charter schools can collaborate to pursue equal educational opportunity.

CHAPTER 27

Wraparound Services Make a Difference

SOLUTION NO. 6 *Provide the medical and social services that poor children need to keep up with their advantaged peers.*

Nearly one of every four children in the United States lives in poverty. This is a far higher proportion than in any other modern, advanced nation. There are children of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who live in poverty, but a disproportionate number are black and Hispanic. One of the main goals of educational and social policy is the narrowing of the gap between children who are advantaged and those who are disadvantaged. School reformers in our era believe that we can “fix” the schools before doing anything directly about poverty, but there is no precedent in history for their belief.

If we don’t act to remedy the social and economic conditions that cause disadvantage, we are unlikely to see any large-scale change in the achievement gaps. While the test scores of poor, black, and Hispanic students have increased in the past twenty years or more and are now at a historical high point, the gaps remain stubbornly large. The gaps are caused by handicapping conditions associated with poverty and grow larger when children from impoverished circumstances attend schools that lack the personnel, resources, programs, and curricula to meet their needs. Other nations have figured out how to remedy or ameliorate or change the conditions in children’s lives so that they are likely to grow up healthy and ready to learn. They make sure that children get off to a good start in life before they begin formal schooling. We pay lip service to the goal but skimp on implementation. In 1990, the nation’s governors and the U.S. Department of Education endorsed an ambi-